

CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



White-tailed doe.

VENISON TASTE TEST

This much we know: Managing deer in North Dakota revolves around harvesting does.

This is simply a matter of taste: In the end, when venison is wrapped and neatly situated in freezers like miniature stacks of cord wood, does typically eat better on the dinner table than bucks.

Habits of the opposite sexes during the November gun season makes for a strong argument why one animal would taste better than the other. At this time of year, bucks are in rut and are running themselves senseless, chasing does and doing battle with other antlered suitors.

"Bucks are probably in their poorest physical condition of the year as they are devoting all their energy to breeding," said Bill Jensen, North Dakota Game and Fish Department big game management biologist. "They also quit eating for the most part during this single-minded quest. Plus, they're all stressed out. When animals start dying in winter, many times the mature bucks die first because they've had it."

Does, on the other hand, are eating right and preparing their bodies to survive winter and the demanding physical requirements of having and raising young.

"While bucks have used up all their fat reserves for breeding, does are probably in their best physical condition," Jensen said.

Harvesting a mature doe, some would argue, is not a gimme, and can be as much of a challenge – getting off the dirt road and hunting in the animal's environment, for example – as the hunter makes it. You'll not only be targeting an animal that has made a habit of staying on all fours, but assists younger deer and other hangers on in sidestepping the dangers of existing in the wild.

"Unlike bucks, does have all their faculties about them during the hunting season," Jensen said. "They're doing a lot of the thinking while bucks are operating on hormone-driven instinct."

None of this is meant to bemoan bucks, of course, but to maybe better appreciate does – in the field and on the dinner table.

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota *OUTDOORS*.